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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003945

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/BCLTV
PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [TH](#) [POL](#) [MIL](#)

SUBJECT: WORKING WITH THAILAND TO ENGAGE OTHER MILITARIES
IN ASIA

REF: 04 BANGKOK 6056 NOTAL

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. Thailand affords the United States a unique platform in Asia to work jointly with other Asian military forces, including those from Japan and Indonesia, and to conduct multinational peacekeeping, disaster relief and other exercises. Our largest exercise, Cobra Gold, is America's only annual joint/combined multilateral training exercise in the Asia Pacific Region. This year's exercise included participation by Japan and Singapore as well as observers from over twenty countries. Post is also working with the Thais to build a National Training Facility (NTF) -- which could become a regional center -- to improve Thai peacekeeping and counter-terrorism capabilities. Further expansion of our cooperative exercises with Thailand and our expected use of the NTF could go a long way toward establishing a near-continuous presence in South East Asia in support of our stability and security goals in the region. Post solicits assistance from Washington, PACOM, and AmEmbassy Tokyo on effective ways to shape exercises in Thailand to deepen involvement by Japanese Self Defense Forces in PKO and NEO training. Post likewise seeks input on ways we might shape programs hosted by the Thai to engage the Indonesian military in ways consistent with U.S. foreign policy objectives and U.S. law. END SUMMARY.

WE CAN DO THINGS IN THAILAND THAT WE CAN'T DO ELSEWHERE

2. (C) Perhaps due to their lack of a colonial heritage, Thai leaders are far more willing to host multilateral exercises than are others countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or Australia, which avoids multilateral exercises so as not to "dumb down" its own training opportunities, the Royal Thai Government supports multilateral exercises as a way to show regional leadership. For example, after initial skepticism about focusing this year's Cobra Gold exercise on disaster relief, Thai leaders quickly came to embrace the concept -- seeing it as an opportunity to demonstrate Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's regional leadership role. So long as our concepts are properly sold to Thai military and political leaders, post is convinced that we can continue to modify Cobra Gold and other exercises to meet our regional security objectives -- including an ability to establish a near-continuous presence in the region.

WHAT COBRA GOLD HAS BECOME

3. (SBU) 2005 marked the 24th year we've held Cobra Gold. Over that time, the exercise has transformed from a bilateral effort aimed at training to deter a conventional attack from Vietnam, to a multilateral exercise aimed at enhancing humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping skills. Cobra Gold generally includes a staff exercise involving multinational players and observers while bilateral field exercises take place involving thousands of U.S. and Thai troops. Simultaneously, engineers and medics conduct medical civil affairs projects (MEDCAPS) and engineering civil affairs projects (ENCAPS) throughout the country. For the past five years, Singapore has been a participant in the staff exercise. In 2004, the Philippines and Mongolia joined Singapore, the U.S. and Thailand as STAFFEX participants. In 2005, Japan participated in the staff exercise along with Singapore, Thailand and the United States. In addition to participant countries, over 30 nations have sent observers to Cobra Gold. These have traditionally included Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, the Maldives, New Zealand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom. Others participate in various roles, including China, Israel, Russia and France. In 2005, for the first time, Singapore joined U.S. and Thai experts to conduct MEDCAPS in the field.

4. (SBU) Cobra Gold 2005, with its special focus on disaster relief, included participation from WHO, World Food Program, UNDAC and other UN and International relief Agencies as well as a panoply of U.S. and foreign civilian government agencies. A one-week Disaster Relief Workshop was widely attended and included candid presentations by representatives

from tsunami affected countries, including Indonesia. The workshop featured numerous multinational presentations including lessons learned discussions that involved Indian and Pakistani officers on the same panel. This was followed by a one week staff exercise focused on disaster relief and aimed at, among others, participants in PACOM's multinational planning augmentation teams (MPAT) -- military liaison officers who were detailed to our U.S. military tsunami relief headquarters -- Combined Support Force 536 -- that was located at Utapao Royal Thai Naval Air Station during the tsunami relief efforts.

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WHAT COBRA GOLD CAN BE -- ENHANCING JAPANESE PARTICIPATION

15. (C) 2005 marked the first time that Japan participated in Cobra Gold. During the Disaster Relief Conference, Japanese participants spoke candidly about lessons they learned from their tsunami deployment -- the largest overseas deployment of Japanese military forces since WWII. The GOJ has agreed to also participate in Cobra Gold 2006. Given Japan's willingness to participate, Cobra Gold may offer a useful platform to advance further our security interests with Japan. Preliminary planning for Cobra Gold 06 has already begun, but with appropriate guidance from Embassy Tokyo, USFJ, the Department, PACOM and USARPAC (this year's Cobra Gold coordinator), we may be able to persuade the Thai to shape Cobra Gold into something that would allow the Japanese Ground, Air and Maritime Self Defense Forces to step up their participation. Post solicits ideas from experts on ideas to make Cobra Gold more palatable for the Japanese and has two specific questions:

--Under the Cobra Gold aegis, could a Non Combatant Evacuation (NEO) exercise be devised in which the Japanese could participate?

--As part of Cobra Gold, might Japanese medics or engineers be willing to participate in community relations MEDCAPS or ENCAPS as Singaporean medics did this year?

ALLOWING INDONESIA TO PLAY

16. (C) As evidenced by its willingness to allow Utapao to be the hub for regional relief efforts aimed at Aceh and by Thai deliveries of relief supplies there, the Royal Thai Government seems willing to improve its links with Indonesia. Post seeks advice from Washington and Embassy Jakarta on whether, under the Cobra Gold umbrella, training programs could be devised in Thailand that would allow Indonesian forces to conduct peacekeeping or NEO training with Thai and U.S. forces.

A REGIONAL PKO AND COUNTERTERRORISM TRAINING CENTER

17. (C) As well as serving as the host for Cobra Gold, Thailand offers other platforms to practice multinational military operations. Thailand has played an important role in supporting the Global War on Terror and UN sponsored Peace Keeping Operations. In addition to capturing terrorist mastermind Hambali in 2003 -- a key operative link between the Jemaah Islamiyah and al Qaeda -- Thailand sent troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq. Thailand provided peacekeepers to East Timor and just announced that 175 soldiers would deploy to Burundi. JUSMAGTHAI and the Royal Thai Armed Forces have been working for some time to create a National Training Facility (NTF) that would serve as a training venue to enhance Thai proficiency in counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and counter narcotics and to practice conducting professional military operations in an urban environment. In addition to providing Thai military and police a state of the art training facility, the planned center could be used by U.S. troops and as a regional training center.

18. (C) Just as many other Asian countries have realized, Thailand has come to terms with the fact that it must be prepared to combat insurgents in village and urban environments. The construction of a Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) facility as part of the NTF would allow troops to hone urban warfare and counter terrorism skills needed by both peacekeepers and troops training to counter Muslim insurgents in Thailand's southern region. The NTF concept has been embraced by a number of senior Thai leaders. In the months and years to come, it will be worth exploring with other governments in the region whether they would be willing to practice combined peacekeeping operations at an NTF facility in Thailand. An NTF in Thailand could conceivably become one of our most effective tools to win support for U.S. foreign policy goals in the War on Terror, to instill respect for human rights, and to advance the professionalization of Asian peacekeeping forces.

POST SEEKS GUIDANCE

19. (C) Given the wide range of U.S. security interests in

East Asia -- ranging from counterterrorism and counter narcotics to non-proliferation -- there may be other key foreign policy objectives we could support through our exercise program in Thailand of which we are unaware. Post welcomes any suggestions or guidance from addressees about ways we can shape our program in Thailand to advance our interests in this region.

BOYCE